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AUTHOR Anderson, Lee; Marsh, Julie
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a study of the effectiveness of charter schools in California. The study's purpose was to report preliminary findings to the Legislative Analyst's Office relating to the educational performance, characteristics, and practices of charter schools and their sponsoring agencies. The study addressed six central questions: (1) What reform strategies and assumptions drive charter schools? (2) What are the characteristics of charter schools in California? (3) What practices most sharply distinguish charter schools from noncharter public schools? (4) Are sponsoring agencies holding charter schools accountable for their performance? (5) What are the relationships between charter schools and their sponsoring agencies? and (6) How are charter schools assessing their own educational outcomes? Data for the study were obtained through a telephone survey of 111 charter schools approved as of April 1, 1997; through a mail survey to all district and county sponsors of charter schools; through site visits to 12 charter schools; and through semistructured interviews with state administrators, policymakers, and policy analysts. A key finding was that charter schools did not always seek increasing degrees of autonomy from their sponsoring agencies and that these agencies have considerable authority for determining the content and terms of individual charters. Comparisons of charter schools' performance over time yielded mixed results. Contains 12 references. (RJM)

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Early Results of a Reform Experiment: Charter Schools in California

Lee Anderson
Julie Marsh
SRI International[1]
333 Ravenswood Avenue, Room BS184, Menlo Park, CA 94025

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Introduction

The California Legislature enacted the Charter Schools Act of 1992 to permit teachers, parents, students, and community members to establish schools that would be free from most state and district regulations (Senate Bill 1448). California was the second state to put this type of law into place—Minnesota had enacted charter school legislation the previous year. Since California and Minnesota ventured into this charter school arena, many other states have followed their leads. As of 1997-98, 29 states and the District of Columbia have existing charter school laws, though not all have schools in operation (Dale & DeSchryver, 1997).

In California, charter schools can be proposed by anyone, but a charter petition must be submitted to a local school district or county governing board with signatures from either 10% of the teachers in the school district or 50% of the teachers in an individual school. Charter petitioners must also persuade their local board (or county board) to approve the form and content of their petition. Upon approval, the petition becomes the school's charter. The California Department of Education provides each

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[1] The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors. The authors wish to thank the other members of the study team, Judith Powell, Jose Blackorby, and Kara Finnegan, as well as our SRI colleagues Daniel Humphrey and Patrick Shields, who provided valuable input. Joel Schwartz, Project Director, California Office of the Legislative Analyst, also provided valuable guidance to the study team. For the text of the full report, see Judith Powell, Jose Blackorby, Julie Marsh, Kara Finnegan, & Lee Anderson (1997), *Evaluation of Charter School Effectiveness*, Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. The report is available on-line: http://www.lao.ca.gov/sri_charter_schools_1297-part1.html. The study was an interim evaluation intended to provide the legislature with information prior to a more in-depth evaluation, which is legally mandated to be completed by January 1999.

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charter school with a number, in order of receipt, a function that was initially intended to ensure that the total number of charter schools within the state does not exceed the legislative cap of 100. Although the law mandates a cap of 100, the State Board of Education has been waiving the cap on a case-by-case basis since 1996.

Charter schools are a subject of intense interest across the country. Because California's charter law has been in place for a long time compared with those of most other states, many of the state's charter schools have been in operation long enough to enable researchers to draw preliminary conclusions about the effectiveness of their organizational arrangements and other practices.

This paper reports findings from a study of the effectiveness of charter schools in California. The study, conducted by researchers at SRI International, was sponsored by the Office of the Legislative Analyst at the direction of the state legislature. The purpose of this study was to report preliminary findings to the Legislative Analyst's Office relating to the educational performance, characteristics, and practices of charter schools and their sponsoring agencies. The findings reported in this paper are organized by the following list of research questions:

1. What reform strategies and assumptions drive charter schools?
2. What are the characteristics of charter schools in California?
3. What practices most sharply distinguish charter schools from noncharter public schools?
4. Are sponsoring agencies holding charter schools accountable for their performance?
5. What are the relationships between charter schools and their sponsoring agencies?
6. How are charter schools assessing their own educational outcomes?

Our research design was guided by several beliefs about school change. These include our beliefs that the process of change is complex and dynamic, that significant time is required for fundamental shifts in a school and its classrooms, that student learning is underemphasized and process is overemphasized in many reform efforts, and that changes in student achievement must be understood in the context of school- and classroom-level changes. In light of these underlying beliefs, we employed multiple methods and triangulation of data collection from a variety of sources to address our research questions.

The study was designed to provide descriptive and analytical information on the status of California charter schools. Data collection took place from May to November 1997. Our multifaceted approach allowed the team to compile and analyze quantitative data, including student and teacher demographic data, as well as qualitative data, such as interviews of school staff and observations of classroom activities, in a short period of time. The following paragraphs briefly describe each data source.

State databases. For basic descriptive details about charter schools, the study team used the California Department of Education's Web page and the Department's Charter Schools Office as resources. We also accessed several statewide databases for making comparisons between charter schools, noncharter schools and district- and statewide averages. These databases included the California Department of Education's California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS), the Language Census, and the High School Performance Report.

Telephone survey of all charter schools. We included all 124 schools with charters approved as of April 1, 1997, in our telephone survey sample. A total of 111 charter schools responded, representing a 90% response rate. Of these, 98 were in operation during the 1996-97 school year.[2] The participating schools represented 30 counties and 80 districts across the state. Individual respondents were primarily school directors or coordinators, but may have been other school staff, such as teachers who had leadership roles. The primarily closed-ended telephone surveys requested information on charter school characteristics, student demographics, teacher characteristics, finances, autonomy, instructional programs, assessment systems, and accountability. Most survey items referred to the 1996-97 school year.

Mail survey to all district and county sponsors of charter schools. We developed two charter school sponsor surveys; one version was sent to 71 public school districts, and the other version was sent to 7 county offices of education. These districts and counties represented the entire population of charter school sponsors for the schools receiving approval as of April 1, 1997.[3] Forty-five sponsor surveys (39 districts and 6 counties) were returned in time to be analyzed (a 58% response rate). The sponsor surveys were designed both to triangulate charter school survey responses and to acquire district-level data for comparison purposes. Survey questions also elicited information

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[2] Ten of the responding schools were not yet open, and two had suspended operation.

[3] Two charter school districts did not receive this survey because the schools' sponsor is the California Department of Education.

about relationships between charter schools and their sponsoring agencies and the existence of district and county policies regarding charter schools. The survey included a school supplement for every school sponsored by the agency.

Site visits to charter schools. To gain an in-depth picture of charter school operations, we conducted 12 case studies in fall 1997. A sample of 11 charter schools was randomly selected from the population of 50 charter schools that had been in operation since September 1994.[4] We limited this sample selection to those schools that had been in operation for 2 1/2 years or longer to ensure that schools had been given the opportunity to implement their educational programs. In addition, the team included in the case study sample the charter district that had been in operation since September 1994. This allowed the team to study in greater depth the issues faced by schools in charter districts sponsored by the California Department of Education. This initial sample was analyzed to ensure variation in the location, socioeconomic status, and financial independence of these charter schools. In addition, we performed statistical testing, which confirmed that the ethnicity of the sample was representative of that of the entire pool of charter schools that had been in operation since September 1994.

Site visits were conducted by one- or two-person teams and required approximately 1 to 2 days at the school site and a half day at the sponsoring agency. During the visits, team members met with teachers, parents, and school administrators at the charter schools. At most schools, the study team also conducted classroom observations. At the sponsoring agency, team members interviewed board members, union officials, business office staff, superintendents, and other appropriate district or county administrators. Team members also collected policy handbooks, student assessment data, and school accountability report cards during these visits.

State-level interviews. We conducted semi-structured interviews with a range of state administrators, policy-makers, and policy analysts with responsibility for or knowledge of charter schools in California. Respondents included administrators in the California Department of Education and the Department of Finance, consultants to the education committees of the state legislature, and representatives of nongovernmental bodies, such as a state teacher's union and a research institute. The interviews covered topics relating to state policies that help or hinder charter schools, the impact of charter

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[4] To lessen the burden on schools, sites participating in the U.S. Department of Education's charter school study conducted by RPP International were not included in the sample. One school declined to participate and was replaced by a school that was chosen to increase variation in geographic location. The sample was also adjusted slightly to increase the geographic distribution of the sites.

schools on the overall public school system, and changes in state policies or the charter school legislation that might improve the effectiveness of these schools.

This paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we present the reform context of charter schools and outline the basic assumptions underlying this strategy. Next, we summarize the overall characteristics of charter schools according to three comparisons: similarities and differences between charter and noncharter public schools and variation among charter schools. In the fourth section, we discuss charter school accountability, including our findings about the relationship between charter schools and their sponsoring agencies and charter school outcomes. We conclude the paper with a brief report on charter school developments in California since we completed our research. We also make recommendations for further research.

The Reform Context and Rationale for Charter Schools

The charter school movement is relatively young, but it builds on several ideas from earlier school reforms. Charter schools also enjoy considerable political popularity among state and federal policy-makers, including legislators, governors, and the president. Charter schools have political appeal because they are viewed as a bold strategy for addressing real and perceived problems in public education. Although bold to some observers, charter schools are based on ideas that have been evolving among practitioners and researchers for the past 25 years. The effective schools movement in the 1970s (Edmonds, 1975; Purkey & Smith, 1983), school-based decision-making and school restructuring in the 1980s (Elmore, 1990; David & Shields, 1991; Newmann, 1991), and parental choice and the provision of greater autonomy in return for increased accountability in the 1990s (Chubb & Moe, 1990) have contributed to several of the ideas driving the charter movement of today. Specifically, these ideas include the following assumptions:

- The school is the key unit in which to promote improvements in teaching and learning for all students.
- Effective schools are organized not by past practice or external regulations, but by the goal of improving teaching and learning.
- The appropriate approach to reforming a school will vary across schools.
- Effective schools involve teachers, parents, and administrators in critical discussion and decision-making.
- Schools must be held accountable for student performance.

Again, these assumptions are based on an extensive body of educational research and experience from practice. A separate set of beliefs, based partly on research but also on a distinct set of ideologies about schooling, underlie charter schools. From an education policy standpoint, their common feature is the large degree to which they represent the views of charter school supporters. These beliefs can be summarized as follows:

(1) Students and their parents should have educational choices. The quality of local schools is often a factor considered by residents when choosing a home. Although some families choose parochial and other private schools, this is not an option for most of those who cannot afford private-school costs. Choices within the public school system are usually fairly limited: magnet schools that offer particular curricular emphases, open enrollment for all schools within a district, and interdistrict transfers.

In light of this belief, charter schools are designed to offer an additional choice within the public school system. They fall in the middle of the choice continuum that ranges from neighborhood schools (i.e., no choice) to school vouchers, where all families receive tax-supported "vouchers" that can be redeemed at public schools or private schools for all or part of the cost of a child's education. The strongest advocates of choice invoke a market metaphor and declare that schools will improve only if they are forced to compete for students, just as businesses must compete for customers and clients (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990). Thus, according to their supporters, charter schools can provide an educational alternative without completely restructuring the school system. (As public entities, charter schools are not allowed to charge tuition, discriminate in enrolling students, or engage in sectarian practices.)

(2) Public schools will be more successful if they are not encumbered by state and local rules and regulations. External regulations have not always prevented schools and students from failing. For example, state rules about instructional minutes do not ensure that students learn to read, write, and compute proficiently. Rules about teacher credentialing do not always prevent incompetent teachers from teaching and gaining tenure. Certain requirements about health, safety, and due process for special populations are important and necessary. However, the sheer volume of current regulations stifles creativity and innovation in public schools, especially in those schools that could benefit from radical new ideas. Once the bulk of these rules and regulations are waived through the charter agreement, according to charter proponents, schools will be better able to focus on teaching students.

(3) Decisions about a school's instructional program should be made as close to students as possible. State and district mandates may not match the instructional needs of students, the desires of parents, or the specialized knowledge and interests of teachers. Too few decisions about instructional programs are made at the school level. In addition, school personnel control few or no resources of their own and may not have input about hiring and teacher placement decisions. Charter schools are intended to control as much of their own destiny as they wish by vesting site administrators, teachers, and parents with unprecedented decision-making roles.

(4) The charter school experiment will lead to innovations that will improve the rest of the public school system. Many arguments in favor of charter schools cite the learning opportunities that charter schools provide for educators in noncharter public schools (e.g., Hart, 1997). Charter schools can exert competitive pressure on school districts to change inefficient practices for the benefit of the larger system. Charter schools can also serve as laboratories for testing new ideas.

All of these beliefs underlie the charter school movement. Charter schools receive greater autonomy in return for greater accountability for student performance; they are designed to provide parents, teachers, and administrators with greater flexibility and authority to design programs that make sense for their children; and they are urged to build structures and schedules driven by student learning goals.

Charter school policies have encountered opposition from those who are skeptical about the claims of charter advocates or who disagree with their reasons for supporting them. Education scholar Gary Orfield (1998) decries the risks of using "public money to advance a privately defined vision of education" that may be "biased or sectarian." Other critics accuse charter schools of elitism or of practices that exclude certain kinds of students and families (e.g., Becker et al., 1997). At the state and local levels, collective bargaining units have frequently raised objections to proposed charters and charter policies, citing their concerns about teacher tenure, seniority, and salary protections and the use of noncredentialed teachers. We encountered these and other forms of opposition in our California fieldwork.

In the remaining sections of this paper, we report the findings of our research on California charter schools and discuss the implications of these findings. In the next section, we describe the overall characteristics of charter schools in California.

California Charter School Characteristics

Understanding and accounting for the diversity of charter schools is a continuing challenge for educational researchers. It is also a challenge to understand how charter schools compare with noncharter public schools in the same districts and statewide. The data gathered for this study demonstrate wide variation on charter school student and community demographics, teaching practices, administrative relationships, and student outcomes. Although we have been able to identify some characteristics that are common to charter schools, we have also learned that each charter school is a unique educational organization.

In this section, we answer the following research questions: What are the characteristics of charter schools in California? Specifically, in what ways are they similar to noncharter public schools? How are they different? How do charter schools vary among themselves?

How are charter schools similar to other public schools? On several key dimensions, charter schools were similar to noncharter public schools. For example, charter schools were located in all parts of the state in all types of communities: urban, suburban, and rural. Charter schools also provided approximately the same number of calendar days of instruction as all public schools in California (183 days for the average charter school, compared with 175 for the average public school).[5] Like other public schools, charter schools served all grade levels, with a higher proportion serving lower grade levels.

Consistent with other findings (RPP International and the University of Minnesota, 1997), students attending California charter schools were demographically similar to students attending all public schools in the state.[6] These similarities include racial/ethnic composition, socioeconomic status, receipt of special education services, and limited English proficiency. In all racial/ethnic categories, the difference between students in charter schools and students statewide was less than 9 percentage points (e.g., 48% of charter school students were white, compared with 40% of students statewide; 34% of

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[5] State average supplied by School Services of California, Inc., Sacramento, CA.

[6] Differences and similarities between charter and noncharter schools sometimes depended on the level of analysis. For example, within their own school districts, charter schools tended to enroll relatively more white students and relatively fewer Hispanic students than noncharter schools. Statewide, however, charter schools and noncharter schools served ethnically similar student populations. See our full report (referenced in footnote 1) for more data on this issue.

charter school students were Hispanic, compared with 40% statewide).[7] Approximately 43% of all students enrolled in charter schools were eligible for the National School Lunch Program, compared with 47% statewide.[8] In addition, 8% of all students enrolled in charter schools received special education services, compared with 9% of the total public school population in the state.[9] Twenty percent of all students enrolled in charter schools were identified as limited English proficient, compared with 24% of the public school population statewide.[10]

It is also worth noting that charter school teachers had a racial/ethnic composition similar to teachers statewide. Charter school instructional staff were primarily "white, not of Hispanic origin" (71%)—which is slightly lower than the statewide figure of 78%.[11] Starting salaries reported by charter schools (on average, $27,000) were also consistent with the state average ($25,000).[12]

How do charter schools differ from other public schools? Despite the similarities noted above, charter schools had many distinct characteristics that set them apart from most other public schools in California. On average, charter schools enrolled a much smaller student population (434 per school) than the average school enrollment statewide (767).[13] In addition, more than 40% of charter schools enrolled fewer than 200 students, whereas statewide only 6% of schools served fewer than 200 students. In contrast to public schools statewide, charter schools often did not fit the traditional grade-level groupings—K-6 (elementary), 6/7-8 (middle), and 9-12 (high)—and often served grades spanning two or more traditional grade-level groupings. For example, 20% of

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[7] State figures come from CBEDS 1996-97, as reported in the Public School Summary Statistics, Educational Demographics Unit, CDE. Charter school percentages were calculated from the CBEDS 1996-97 database downloaded from the Internet. Both sets of percentages were calculated by taking the total number of students in a category divided by the total number of students enrolled.

[8] The charter school calculations were based on the responses of the 73 schools that provided information regarding their students' eligibility for the lunch program. The Education Finance Division of the CDE provided state data.

[9] The total population figure refers to the 1994-95 school year. U.S. Department of Education, cited in Education Vital Statistics 1997. *American School Board Journal*, December 1997.

[10] State figures come from CBEDS 1996-97, Public School Summary Statistics, Educational Demographics Unit, CDE.

[11] State figures come from CBEDS 1996-97, Public School Summary Statistics. They include only credentialed instructional staff. Charter school figures include all staff, whether or not they have credentials.

[12] This 1994-95 state salary figure is an estimate from the American Federation of Teachers, *Surveys and Analysis of Salary Trends*, as cited in *Digest of Education Statistics 1996*, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Washington, D.C. (November 1996).

[13] The state figure includes charter and noncharter public schools.

charter schools served elementary *and* middle grades, compared with 7% of public schools in the state. Similarly, 11% of all charter schools served kindergarten through 12th grade, compared with 2% of public schools in the state. Another distinguishing characteristic of charter schools was the use of mandatory parent involvement requirements. For example, 75% of charter schools required that a parent or adult sign a contract with the school when enrolling a child. Finally, unlike most noncharter public schools, many charter schools enrolled students who lived outside the sponsoring district boundaries. In fact, approximately 34% of the district-sponsored schools drew 25% or more of their students from other districts, and 13% of charter schools reported that most or all of their students (76%-100%) lived outside the sponsoring district.

How do charter schools differ among themselves? Given the wide variation of charter school missions, structures, and populations, it is extremely difficult to generalize about charter schools as a group. Our research uncovered several key variables that distinguished charter schools from each other. Perhaps the most striking difference was between charter schools that *converted* from existing public schools or programs and charter schools that were *newly created*. Conversion schools and newly created schools (or start-ups) each represented exactly half of our 98 survey respondents. Compared with conversion schools, start-up charter schools were smaller, more often enrolled students from a wide geographic area, and served more nontraditional grade ranges (e.g., grades 5-8). Start-up charter schools were more likely to have instructional staff without union representation, and to have fewer traditional contract provisions for instructional staff (e.g., tenure). Start-ups were also less likely to serve special education and LEP students than were conversion schools. At the same time, however, they reported serving more low-achieving students than did conversion schools.

Home-based study was another variable that differentiated charter schools. (Note that the conversion of home-based study programs to charter schools was not envisioned by the authors of the legislation and is fairly controversial. See Hart, 1997.) The 15 survey respondents that identified home-based study with the parent as primary instructor as the predominant, though not necessarily only, method of instruction for most students had a distinct profile. These schools were most often located in small towns or rural areas, were somewhat more likely to require parent contracts, were more likely to enroll

white students, and were less likely to enroll LEP and special education students.[14] (We discuss home-study programs in more detail in the next section.)

The schools' level of financial autonomy also created clear divisions among charter schools. For example, schools reporting financial autonomy[15] were more likely than financially dependent schools to have less traditional calendars and schedules—approximately 50% of financially autonomous schools operated on year-round calendars, compared with 23% of financially dependent charter schools. Teacher contracts and personnel policies at charter schools with financial autonomy also differed greatly from those at charter schools that reported more ties to their sponsoring agency. For example, 70% of financially autonomous charter schools, compared with 26% of other charter schools, reported that none of their teaching staff belonged to unions. Conversely, only 8% of the financially independent charter schools reported that *all* of their teachers belonged to unions, compared with 43% of financially dependent schools. On average, starting teacher salaries were slightly higher at financially autonomous schools—approximately $28,600—compared with $26,700 at financially dependent schools.

We also detected some differences among charter schools in various *locations*—rural, urban, suburban—and with different *sponsoring agencies*—district (87%) versus county (7%) versus the state (6%: the two charter districts are jointly sponsored by the California Department of Education and the State Board of Education). For example, urban charter schools enrolled a greater number of students who were eligible for the federal lunch program and a greater percentage of LEP students than schools at other locations. County-sponsored charter schools reported a greater percentage of low-achieving students than did district-sponsored charter schools. These statistics are not unexpected, since many county-sponsored charter programs—charter and noncharter—were specially designed to serve special-needs students.

Distinctive Charter School Practices

In the preceding section, we examined overall characteristics of charter schools, such as teacher and student demographics. We also presented several statewide

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[14] The number of home-based study schools and the total number of students they served were so small that their impact on overall charter statistics was negligible.

[15] "Financial autonomy" was derived from survey responses. Respondents who reported having full control over staff salaries and benefits and other budgetary expenses were coded as financially autonomous. In this paper, we also use the terms "independent" for charter schools that are financially autonomous and "dependent" for schools that are not.

comparisons between charter and noncharter schools. Most of this information was drawn from our surveys and our analysis of state databases. In this section, we look more closely at charter school operations and practices, referring to our charter school data as well as other data sources. In so doing, we attempt to answer this research question: What practices most sharply distinguish charter schools from noncharter public schools?

Throughout our research, we identified several charter school practices and innovations that tend not to occur in most other public schools. In some instances, such as home schooling and the use of noncredentialed teachers, legal barriers prevent other public schools from adopting these practices. In other cases, such as parent contracts, the practices we identified are possible in noncharter schools but are more widespread in charter entities. In principle, charter schools in California are able to request waivers from most provisions of the state Education Code. In reality, however, sponsoring agencies have considerable power in determining what regulations can be waived for their charter schools. (Noncharter public schools have far less latitude in requesting waivers. In addition, many charter schools choose not to seek them.) In the remainder of this section, we describe several practices that distinguish charter schools from other public schools in California: home-based learning programs, noncredentialed teachers, innovative teacher personnel practices, financial independence, and parent contracts. We then present our study findings on the advantages of charter status reported by charter school administrators, teachers, and parents.

Home-based and independent-study programs. Traditional notions of schools define them as physical places where educators and students come together each school day in an organized fashion to participate in learning activities. By changing the first part of this assumption, home schools and independent-study programs dramatically alter traditional models of schooling. Charter schools based on home- and independent-study models are different from other charter schools and thus, by definition, are difficult to compare with other charter schools or regular public schools. These schools are based on school visions or philosophies that result in new structures and instructional delivery systems, but not always in innovative curricula. Home-study charter schools are built on the idea that each family or student is responsible for developing an individualized learning plan. Student learning in these charter schools may occur at different times of day and in different locations. At times, the student may work individually, be taught one-on-one by a parent or a charter school teacher, or participate in small-group classes.

Our survey indicated that 29% of all charter schools employed home-based learning with the parent as primary instructor, and 22% employed independent study with the teacher as primary instructor. (Many of these schools also reported using other instructional delivery methods, such as classroom instruction.) Three of our case study schools served students in these nontraditional educational settings or configurations. All of these schools' educational programs were characterized by an overarching philosophy of individualized, self-paced learning—which was seen as particularly relevant and effective for students who were not succeeding in the regular public schools. In addition, all these schools offered a menu of programs based on different instructional delivery methods to meet the specific needs of their targeted student populations. However, only one site (described in the next paragraph) offered a markedly different or nontraditional curriculum.

One charter school we visited offered both home-study and independent-study programs, as well as small-class instruction. When a student enrolled in the school, the parent, student, and facilitator (or teacher) met to determine the student's learning plan. At this point, the parent and the facilitator outlined their roles—for example, the parent may have decided to teach and the facilitator determined the curriculum, or vice versa. To graduate from the program, each student must demonstrate proficiency in different areas of learning. This school's "curriculum" options were the most unusual among the three case study sites. Depending on long-term plans and individual talents or interests of the student, the learning program may be based on a more traditional curriculum to enable the student to return to regular public school, or on a more creative curriculum to allow the student to learn thematically.

The second case study site based on home study also provided several options to students. The charter school operated two home-study programs and several other program components. The unifying theme of these programs was that the school served students and families who were not succeeding in or chose not to attend regular public schools. All of the curriculum was based on the sponsoring agency's standards-based curriculum to ensure that students were able to obtain credit for their work if they returned to the regular public schools in the area.

The third charter school offered students either an independent-study or daily classroom-based program. Upon enrollment, students were assessed to determine what competencies/credits they had mastered and what they still needed to graduate. Assessment results were used by the school staff to craft a set of projects or classes based on the students' needs. Students were allowed to move through either the independent-

study or classroom program at their own pace. In the daily classroom-based program, students could work on extra projects outside of class to earn extra credits and could also "test out" of certain classes by demonstrating mastery on various tests. The curriculum in this school was comparable to a more traditional independent-study program. In fact, the textbooks used in this school were the same ones used in the district's alternative education program.

Several directors used their charter status to add structure and resources to their programs—features that were not present in noncharter independent-study or home school programs. For example, the case study charter schools with home-study programs offered electives in a classroom setting to support parents' efforts to educate their children, so that the students were exposed to courses that were taught in regular public schools. At one school, "instructional leaders" (who may or may not be credentialed teachers) offered elementary-level students electives in drama, Spanish, and science and offered high-school-level students electives in math and science, to name a few. The other school offered a range of classes taught by certified teachers, parents, or community members that focused primarily on art, music, and athletics, but also included high school math and English classes.

The structure provided by charter home and independent-study schools is attractive to a certain population of students; all three schools had enrollments of more than 500 students. Remarks from a former home school parent at one charter school may provide insight into this appeal. The parent thought that having her children attend the charter schools provided the "best of both worlds"—not only was the learning program adapted to her children's skills and interests, but she also received the administrative and curricular support of a trained professional.

Use of noncredentialed teachers. In a practice that is philosophically similar to supporting parents as instructors, many charter schools capitalized on the flexibility to hire noncredentialed teachers. Although unique to charter schools, this practice was not as widespread as some critics have charged. On average, charter schools reported that 71% of all instructional staff (full-time and part-time) had full state certification for the subjects they taught. One of our case study schools used this flexibility to hire artists from the community to teach visual arts to students. In another school, parents played a significant instructional role—teaching elective courses to students three afternoons each week, including sign language, yearbook, 4-H, student store, and performing arts. It is important to note that the hiring of noncredentialed teachers occurred in all varieties of charter schools—ones with dependent and independent relationships with their

sponsoring districts. In our case study schools, for example, four out of the eight dependent schools used noncredentialed teachers.

Teacher hiring, placement, and seniority. Many schools also used their charter status to establish personnel practices that differed from the district and union-sanctioned norm. Most common among these practices was the hiring and placement of teachers without regard to seniority. Many of our case study schools cited these practices as one of the primary benefits of becoming a charter. For example, at one charter school the freedom to assign teachers without strict adherence to rules of seniority allowed the school to better match student language needs with teacher skills. In its precharter days, bilingual teachers were said to be scattered throughout the school—placed in many classes where students had little need for primary language instruction. After converting to a charter school, these teachers were reassigned to the bilingual lower-grade classrooms, where administrators and teachers felt students had the greatest need for primary language assistance. In another case, the charter school's hiring practices not only affected its own school community but significantly influenced its sponsoring district's practices—leading them to eliminate seniority altogether as a criterion for placing teachers at new schools or in new positions.

Financial independence. Some charter schools, with the consent of their sponsors, established financial practices and relationships that differed greatly from those of other public schools. According to our school survey, 27% of charter schools had financial autonomy from their sponsoring agency (i.e., they had full control over staff salaries and benefits and other budgetary expenses). Our case study sample included three schools that were financially independent.

At one case study site, a large conversion charter school, the lead administrator's financial expertise enabled the school to negotiate allocations and district withholding and increase the school's share of district funds. School staff coordinated their own financial reporting, payroll, groundskeeping, food services, and adult education programs. School administrators and faculty explained that this financial independence allowed them to direct resources at instructional needs as they were identified at the school level. To them, controlling the school's instructional program meant controlling the allocation of its financial resources.

The financially autonomous case study schools reported significant economies gained by controlling their own budgets. Unlike dependent charter schools, these schools did not have to go through the district purchasing process, but could make autonomous

decisions about how to spend their money and which suppliers to use. Two schools we visited controlled their own maintenance and operations budgets and were able to purchase supplies and equipment at local retailers rather than using district purchasing procedures, which were described as slower and more expensive. One school was able to offer staff a health benefits package that was greater in scope than that offered by the district. At another school, a teacher gave an example of being able to purchase floppy disks directly from the supplier much more quickly and for one-fifth the cost charged by the district.

We found that the financial knowledge base of the school leader made a profound difference in the level of resources that an independent charter school received. One school we visited was a small start-up school. Even though it was financially independent, its director was unfamiliar with school finance. The director was unsure of how much the district retained to cover administrative costs, and he was unaware of whether the school was eligible for any special education or GATE funding (on the basis of what he told us about his student body, the school was probably eligible for both).

Low levels of knowledge regarding school finance were not unique to independent schools, but these schools were at a disadvantage without it. School survey data showed that unfamiliarity with the financial side of schools was widespread among directors of all charter schools. For example, 24% of the charter school directors surveyed did not know whether they were eligible for Title I funds (these were mostly start-up schools). Also, only a small proportion of school directors were able to report funds received in budgetary categories other than state revenue limit, making some of the data unusable.

Parent contracts. Most California charter schools emphasized the importance of parent involvement in school activities and promoted participation with either voluntary guidelines or mandatory requirements. Some charter schools enforced these requirements by means of mandatory (and sometimes binding) parent contracts.[16] Three-quarters (75%) of charter schools required that a parent or adult sign a contract with the school when enrolling a child. In the case study schools, contracts typically covered parents' acceptance of school rules and parent involvement requirements, if there were any. Some charter schools also required parents or adults to participate on committees/governance boards or attend parent meetings (41%) or to participate for a minimum number of hours at school (40%). Many schools did not have consequences if the parent or adult failed to fulfill these requirements; however, 23% of schools with

[16] See Becker et al. (1997) for more on parent contracts in California charter schools.

parent involvement requirements reportedly had asked students to leave because of parents' failure to comply with these rules. Charter schools in rural locations were more likely than others to ask a student to leave when a parent or guardian did not fulfill the participation requirements—55% of rural charter schools reported taking these measures, as opposed to 24% of small-town, 17% of urban, and 14% of suburban charter schools.

Start-up charter schools were more likely than conversion schools to require parent contracts—86% of start-ups, compared with 64% of conversions. Likewise, start-ups were more likely to require parents to participate a minimum number of hours at the school—46% of start-ups, compared with 34% of conversions. Almost all small schools[17] (96%) required parent contracts, and more than half of these schools (59%) required parents to participate in their schools for a minimum number of hours. Large and medium/large schools were less likely than medium/small and small schools to require parent contracts or minimum hours. Similarly, urban charter schools were less likely than schools in other locations to implement parent involvement contracts—58% of urban charter schools required parents to sign a contract with the school, compared with 85% of rural, 84% of small-town, and 74% of suburban charter schools.

The parent involvement requirements in contracts were often quite precise. One case study school, for example, required that a parent volunteer at the school for 3 hours per week; another called for 4 hours per year. Two other schools each called for 5 hours per month. Two of our case study schools actually enforced provisions of the parent contract, leading, in one case, to a lawsuit against the school and, in the other, to a request that several families leave the school. Other schools have struggled with the question of how binding to make their contracts with parents.

In two case study schools, the parent contract idea was dropped during the petitioning process in the face of community opposition. Some educators and advocates objected to mandatory parent involvement on the grounds that working, low-income, or single parents (many of whom were expected to reside outside the schools' historical attendance areas) might not be able to meet the terms of the contracts. Respondents in other charter schools argued that mandatory requirements were not discriminatory if they were flexible and included options for how a parent or guardian could fulfill requirements.

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[17] In our analyses for this study, we define large schools as 600 or more students, medium/large schools as 500-599 students, medium/small schools as 100-499 students, and small schools as fewer than 100 students.

Perceived Advantages of Charter Status

The practices we highlighted above—home study, use of noncredentialed teachers, teacher personnel practices, financial autonomy, and parent contracts—stand out as the features that most sharply differentiate certain charter schools from their noncharter counterparts in the public system. A related topic is how educators in charter schools view the advantages of charter status. The charter school perspective suggests that most charter school practices can be placed on a continuum that runs from freedoms that are extremely rare or nonexistent in other public schools to practices that are also possible in noncharter schools. Of course, how these practices are perceived varies widely. Indeed, some charter school observers might not consider certain charter school practices to be "advantages" at all.

In both the school survey and the case studies, respondents in charter schools reported that their charters provided them with unique opportunities in several areas, ranging from personnel to finance. When school survey respondents were asked specifically what charter status allowed them to do that they could not have done under the traditional district management structure, charter school directors most frequently reported that they were able to *allocate resources in a manner different from the district norm* (87%). Table 1 illustrates the frequency with which survey respondents specified the benefits of charter status.

Perceptions of charter impact varied greatly, depending on the charter school leaders' sense of autonomy. Financially autonomous schools were more likely to report that charter status enabled them to dismiss unsatisfactory teachers (85% of financially autonomous vs. 40% of financially dependent) and purchase materials in a different manner (92% of financially autonomous vs. 74% of financially dependent). Start-up schools were also more likely to report being able to dismiss teachers for unsatisfactory performance, compared with conversion schools (67% vs. 38%).

Respondents in four case study sites had difficulty identifying just what they gained from being a charter, that is, what they were doing differently because they had charter status. In three cases, it is likely that the schools would have been able to implement their educational programs without being charters, given the reform orientation of their respective districts and the history of reform efforts within the schools before becoming charter entities. Charter status, however, insulated these schools—at least theoretically—from district policy changes that responded to shifts in the political climate. For example,

Table 1[18]

BENEFITS OF CHARTER SCHOOL STATUS

Telephone Survey Question D9: "In your opinion, what has charter status allowed you to do that you could not have done under the traditional district management structure?"	Percentage of Schools (n=85)
Allocate resources in a manner different from the district norm.	87
Contract for services with nondistrict providers.	84
Provide support to teachers to improve their skills.	82
Purchase materials in a manner different from the district norm.	80
Dismiss teachers for unsatisfactory performance.	54
Reward teachers for exemplary performance.	52

one principal expressed his belief that a few years ago it would have been difficult for his school to institute its rigorous graduation requirements, which exceeded those of other schools in the district, given the prevailing views in the district at that time. Being a charter school allowed the school to implement a program that was less vulnerable to change from outside forces. In the fourth case, the charter's vision and sense of purpose were lost when the founder left. For the first three schools mentioned, however, charter status gave the staff a sense of empowerment and of being part of a significant reform process. One teacher explained, "The fact that we are a charter, that we are in charge of our destiny, has forced an attitude change. We have a sense of power we never had before, whether it is true or an illusion." According to a parent at another school, "We have our own autonomy. People perceive this whether it's real or not. I assume that the charter caused it." Also, there appears to be a public relations advantage associated with being a charter school that helps the schools attract parents.

Finally, several respondents in our case study schools referred to the value of critically examining (or, in the case of conversion schools, reexamining) their instructional programs and desired outcomes. Of course, this type of review is also possible in noncharter schools. However, charter school personnel reported feeling more

[18] These data do not include responses from the six schools in the state's two charter districts.

motivated to reflect on their practices as a condition of submitting, revising, and renewing their charters.

Holding Charter Schools Accountable

In the remainder of this paper, we describe our findings with regard to several key charter school policy issues: accountability, relationships between charter schools and their sponsoring agencies, and educational outcomes. Our discussion of these issues is drawn from charter school data collected in California. Indeed, some of our findings are due to the specific circumstances and requirements for charter schools in this state. However, the implications of our findings are also relevant to charter school policies in other states. The following research questions guide this discussion: Are sponsoring agencies holding charter schools accountable for their performance? What are the relationships between charter schools and their sponsoring agencies? How are charter schools assessing their own educational outcomes?

It is the intent of California charter law that charter schools will substitute performance-based accountability for conventional rule-based accountability systems. In other words, charter schools are supposed to be given freedom from certain restrictions in exchange for more accountability for academic outcomes. In exchange for waiving rules and regulations, charter schools are expected to demonstrate improved student learning and increases in other school outcomes. Charter school advocates and critics agree on this point: waiving regulations is justified only if educational improvements are made for students in these schools. Our research suggests that this philosophy is accepted and that there is broad agreement on the desirability and political necessity of demonstrating success in charter schools as a condition of their continued existence. In practice, however, ensuring charter school accountability is much more complicated than the underlying philosophy suggests.

Accountability. To gauge the degree to which charter schools are being held accountable, we gathered data on the types of information required from charter schools, how this compared with information required from noncharter schools, and what actions, if any, had been taken by sponsoring agencies in response to these reporting requirements. We focused on the accountability roles played by school districts and county offices of education that have charter schools for one reason: sponsoring agencies have considerable power over charter schools in the Education Code and in actual practice. Therefore, we reasoned, sponsors should also accept responsibility for monitoring school progress in a way that is consistent both with the spirit of freedom and

experimentation in the charter law and with the public trust vested in sponsoring agencies by local voters. This is a balancing act that charter schools and their sponsors have struggled with throughout the experiment.

Our data suggest that charter schools seem not to be held to a higher standard of accountability for students' academic performance than are noncharter schools. This finding does not mean charter schools are not assessing student progress on their own, or that there is widespread abuse of the freedoms given to charter schools. The schools we examined had measurable (to varying degrees) academic goals stated in their charters, but most reported that they were not held accountable for achieving these goals by their sponsoring district or county. Likewise, the case study charter district we visited had not been held accountable for academic progress by the state. Although 85% of schools surveyed said they reported *student achievement* data to their sponsors, only 4% reported that the sponsor had ever *requested specific actions or imposed sanctions* in response to any data, achievement or otherwise.

Survey data from sponsoring agencies tell a similar story. Three sponsoring agencies (8% of those responding to this item) said that they had requested actions or imposed sanctions on charter schools in response to these data. Interestingly, the number was higher with respect to *noncharter* schools in the same districts and counties: seven sponsoring agencies (17%) requested actions or imposed sanctions on noncharter schools in response to data that were collected. In the case study sites, sponsors did not routinely compare case study charter schools' test scores with those of noncharter schools in the district. And even less frequently did sponsors look at charter schools' progress toward attaining the goals stated in their charters as part of an annual review process. Several of the schools reported providing the sponsor with an annual report (either oral or written), but these reports usually did not include outcome data. When asked, districts often said that accountability was something they needed to address for all schools, charter and noncharter alike.

On the other hand, district and county sponsors were much more diligent about financial accountability. According to the survey, 91% of schools reported finance and accounting data to their sponsor. All the schools in our case study sample reported submitting periodic financial reports to the district, and charter law requires all schools to conduct annual audits. School district, county, and, in some cases, school staff were determined not to let their charter schools become headline stories of fiscal mismanagement. In fact, charter schools mentioned this kind of district oversight as an advantage.

The disparity between educational and fiscal oversight is a strong indication that school districts and counties are not accustomed to holding schools accountable for academic performance. Many noncharter public schools are not held accountable for academic outcomes by districts, and districts are not held accountable for academic outcomes by the state, and so it should not be surprising that districts appeared to be continuing in the same pattern with charter schools.

It may also be that sponsors are waiting until the formal renewal process to evaluate how well the school has done in meeting its objectives and to determine whether or not the charter will be renewed. Some charter schools appear to be doing the same thing; some charter school administrators we interviewed indicated that they were waiting for renewal to address certain accountability issues. The Education Code allows a charter to be granted for a maximum of 5 years, at which time the sponsor must review the progress the school has made and decide whether to renew the charter. Most schools have not yet completed the first "cycle" of the charter. As of June 1997, according to our school survey, only 13% of charter schools in California had gone through a renewal process for their charters. However, 64% of the charters in the state are due to be renewed by the year 2000. Two of the schools we studied recently renewed their charters without encountering any opposition. In one case, the charter was renewed 1 year early. In the other, the school's small size was cited by the sponsoring district as the reason for its lack of concern about many matters, including charter renewal.

In contrast to the lack of accountability to sponsors for academic outcomes, most charter schools reported feeling accountable to parents in this area. Ninety percent of schools surveyed reported that they systematically assessed parent satisfaction by using multiple methods, including surveys (100%), interviews or focus groups (59%), and behavioral indicators such as meeting attendance (40%). Charter schools also reported determining parent satisfaction by some other means (32%), such as informal communication with parents, volunteerism, or returning enrollment.

The charter school accountability picture is incomplete without comparing the accountability requirements for charter and noncharter schools in the same district or county office jurisdiction. Table 2 displays data from the district and county surveys on accountability reporting requirements for charter and noncharter schools. There is a strong degree of consistency in the accountability requirements for charter and noncharter schools in the same district or county. For example, almost all sponsoring agencies responding to this item required student achievement test scores and finance and accounting data from both charter and noncharter schools, among those sponsoring

agencies that responded to this item. In two cases, the sponsoring agency did not require the reporting of student achievement data from any of its schools; in five additional cases, these data were required from noncharter schools but not from charter schools. Teacher-assigned grades stood out as the type of data with less consistency in reporting requirements across the sample of districts and counties: 41% of sponsoring agencies responding to the surveys required reporting of grades from noncharter but not charter schools.

Table 2

SPONSORING AGENCY ACCOUNTABILITY DATA REQUIREMENTS FOR CHARTER AND NONCHARTER SCHOOLS

	Percentage of Sponsors with Same Requirements for Charters and Noncharters	Percentage of Sponsors Requiring Type of Data from Charters *and* Noncharters	Percentage of Sponsors *Not* Requiring Type of Data from Charters *or* Noncharters	Total Number of Respondents
Finance and accounting data	97	92	5	37
Other data	91	5	86	37
Student achievement test scores	87	81	6	36
Parent satisfaction data	78	51	27	37
Student scores from authentic assessment tests	78	47	31	36
Student behavior indicators, e.g., attendance	76	73	3	37
Teacher-assigned grades	59	43	16	37

As we have seen in this discussion of charter school accountability, responsibility for these activities rests with both the charter school and its sponsoring agency. In California, there are other aspects of the relationship between charter schools and their sponsors that affect a school's level of autonomy. Sponsoring agencies have considerable power over charter schools and play multiple and potentially conflicting roles as intermediaries between charter schools and the rest of the education system. Sponsoring agencies can severely restrict the freedom of specific schools to design and implement their own instructional visions. They may also allow schools more freedom than school staffs are equipped to handle. In the next section, we present our findings on

the relationship between charter schools and the school districts and counties that sponsor them.

The School-Sponsor Relationship and Degrees of Autonomy

Relationships between charter schools and their sponsors were as varied as all other aspects of charter schools. They ranged from full dependence on the sponsoring agency for key services to nearly complete independence. Some schools, in fact, were dependent to the point that the advantages of their charter status were obscured. Overall, the relationships between charter schools and their sponsoring agencies were still evolving. Both sides were working toward defining respective rights, roles, and responsibilities. The presence or absence of conflict was related to how well a charter school fit with its sponsoring district's mission, or how far a charter school pushed the district to change the status quo.

In theory, charter schools are free from all rules and regulations described in the California Education Code. The text of the charter school law states that "a charter school shall comply with all of the provisions set forth in its charter petition, but is otherwise exempt from the laws governing school districts except as specified in Section 47611"[19] (Education Code Section 47610). However, this unrestricted freedom was not the reality in many charter schools across the state. In fact, charter schools were often subject to district policies and procedures, except where they sought waivers in their charters or subsequent agreements. In many cases, charter schools did not take advantage of all aspects of their "automatic waiver" from state and district regulations because their sponsoring districts or counties did not allow it. The end result of charter-granting negotiations was typically an understanding (or a compromise) regarding the amount of control or autonomy the charter school would have. Hence, most charter schools reported having varying degrees of control over school decisions, from the school budget to curriculum and assessment. Survey data indicate that few schools (11%) were fully independent, i.e., they reported having full control over all 10 areas listed in Table 3.[20]

In many cases, concerns about their own liability kept some sponsors from loosening their ties to charter schools. According to district and county surveys, 15 (or 38%) of responding sponsors prohibit charter schools from becoming legally

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[19] Education Code Section 47611 refers to the state's Teacher Retirement System.

[20] For each decision or policy, schools were asked how much control they had: full control, partial control, or no control.

independent, while 11 (28%) allow, but do not require, charter schools to become legally independent. Other sponsoring agencies reported not having a formal policy on legal independence.

Table 3
SCHOOLS REPORTING FULL CONTROL (RANKED IN ORDER OF FREQUENCY)

	Percentage of Schools	Total Number of Respondents
Daily schedule	83	96
Student disciplinary policies	71	96
Purchasing of supplies and equipment	68	97
Establishing curriculum	63	97
Student assessment policies	56	97
Student admission policies	51	97
Other budgetary expenses	51	97
School calendar	49	97
Staff hiring, discipline, and dismissal	44	96
Staff salaries and benefits	31	97

Several of our case study sponsors reported that their belief that they would ultimately be held liable for charter schools' financial or educational failure discouraged them from giving charter schools more freedom. In at least three districts in our case study sample, this point of view was shaped by past negative experiences with charter schools. For example, one district previously sponsored an independent charter school with minimal oversight, only to discover later that the school was failing to provide a legitimate education for its students. (Interestingly, whereas some districts were concerned with their ultimate liability, several districts appeared willing to give their charter schools independent status. In one case, the district was concerned with liability if the school *did* remain closely tied to the district. In another case, the district wanted to prevent further accusations that it was denying the school all the resources to which it was entitled.) Open-ended responses on the sponsoring agency survey included several comments about liability concerns. In the words of one district respondent, "We are concerned about district liability. We seem to have responsibility but not authority."

Sponsor liability remains a large gray area in charter legislation. We were told by districts that the state charter office has no definitive guidelines on liability, and that issues will not be resolved until cases are litigated. On the other hand, a state-level official calls liability a "straw man" that districts use to keep from giving charters independence. The California Department of Education recently issued several recommendations to the state board of education regarding the financial operation of charter schools (California Department of Education, 1997). However, the recommendations are only "a starting point for discussion and debate on the precise nature of changes that need to be made in statute and regulation in order to address these difficult issues" (page 14). Until clarification is made by the legislature or the courts, the liability issue remains ambiguous.

A key finding of our research was that charter schools did not always seek increasing degrees of autonomy from their sponsoring agencies. Indeed, charter schools had varying degrees of interest in gaining more authority or control over school policies. In many of our case study sites, directors of schools that had dependent relationships with their sponsors reported being satisfied with these close ties. One principal told us more than once that he liked the traditional relationship between his school and the district. These schools tended to be clear on what they wanted to gain from charter status and were wary of the costs of taking on more responsibility than they could handle. In a few cases, charter schools were reluctant to lose the legitimacy that came with being a part of the district (i.e., protection from external accusations that the school has no accountability). Typically, what dependent schools gained was exemption from certain Education Code and/or district regulations. For example, four dependent schools (i.e., schools where most functions were controlled by the sponsoring agencies) were able to use noncredentialed teachers. One school was able to serve students who had been expelled from the district. Another school was able to have graduation requirements that exceeded those of the state and the district. Another school was able to lengthen the school year to 210 days.

There were exceptions to these schools' satisfaction with the status quo, however. On the survey, more than half of the charter schools that did not have full control reported wanting more control over purchasing and staff hiring, discipline, and dismissal. Among our case study sample, three charter schools were dissatisfied with their dependent (or quasi-dependent) relationships with their respective sponsors and wanted to become more independent. In one case, the dissatisfaction stemmed from a small but vocal group of parents who believed that financial independence would benefit the

school. Teachers at this school, however, were concerned about job security if the school became independent and wanted to maintain the status quo. The second school had made small steps toward becoming financially independent, with the support of both school and district staff. Leadership at the third school likened its current arrangement of financial dependence on the district to the "fox minding the hen house."

Outcomes of California Charter Schools

In this section, we discuss our findings about charter school outcomes. These findings are based on data we gathered from charter schools and their sponsoring agencies in the surveys and case studies. We found that available data do not allow us to draw definitive conclusions about charter schools' performance. Indeed, most of our comparisons of charter and noncharter student outcomes yielded inconclusive results. Comparable student outcome data between charter schools and the noncharter schools in their sponsoring districts and counties were not available, in most cases. Even when we did find such data, the data did not allow us to determine the relative academic performance of noncharter schools. There were many explanations for these circumstances: the absence of a statewide assessment system during the life cycles of charter schools that are currently operating, varying philosophies about and approaches to measuring student achievement, and the lack of consistent approaches by sponsoring agencies in monitoring student outcomes at charter schools. Of course, these challenges are not unique to charter schools. But the political stakes are higher for charter schools if charters are revoked or the experiment ends because of inconclusive indicators of student performance in charter schools.

Despite these challenges, we are able to address the usefulness of two outcome areas in considering the success of California's charter school experiment. These outcome areas are progress toward charter goals and student achievement. For each of the outcome areas, we present some of the complexities of the issues surrounding it, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of each in presenting a broad picture of California's charter schools.

Progress toward charter goals. One way to address the outcomes issue is to look at the degree to which charter schools are meeting the objectives that they specified in their original charters. This approach is useful for several reasons. First, it allows the school to be evaluated in terms of the entire range of objectives that it was seeking to accomplish, as opposed to focusing on one or two issues. For example, many charters directly propose changes in governance, staffing, parent involvement, curriculum and

instruction, and student outcomes. A fair evaluation of the school should take each of these areas into account, particularly since progress across different outcome areas is likely to be uneven. Second, some objectives may be difficult to define or to achieve in a relatively short time. In this instance, there may be interim evidence of progress toward achieving the ultimate goals. For example, if a charter school identifies high levels of parent involvement as a goal, the creation of mechanisms to achieve it (e.g., site council, parent contracts) may constitute evidence of steps in that direction, even if the level of participation is not consistent with that specified in the charter. In addition, we found that some charters established very ambitious goals that may take considerable time to achieve—possibly more than the 5-year time frame of most charters. Results that show improvement toward those goals can also be viewed as positive, if interim, outcomes. Third, such analyses have local relevance because the goals were established and pursued by school-level stakeholders. Presumably, these results of the evaluation could be used in an ongoing fashion to improve the school and help to achieve its goals.

Charter schools approach this task quite differently and situate themselves along a continuum from concrete and quantitative to informal and process oriented. At one end of the continuum, several case study charter schools took a very concrete approach to addressing their progress toward their goals through the collection and analysis of data, and the documentation of those analyses in their annual reports or other formats. In its annual report, one school listed each of its objectives—a longer school year, parent involvement, teacher-parent governance, the creation of a preschool, the creation of a health clinic, racial balance, technology and arts foci, high expectations, and achievement—and documented whether each objective had been reached over the course of the previous school year. In the cases where the goals had been achieved (e.g., parent involvement and governance), a detailed description of the process that brought the mechanisms into place and documentation of their effectiveness were provided (e.g., site council bylaws, participants' names, meeting schedules, decisions reached). In cases where the goals were not completely achieved (e.g., student achievement), an explanation of the results was included (e.g., program start-up with inexperienced teachers, testing schedule) with a prescription to remedy the problems in the following year (e.g., teacher inservice training). In other instances, the report identified some successes as well as challenges in meeting certain goals. For example, although computers had been purchased for all of the school's classrooms, not all the teachers had received sufficient training to make optimal use of them in their classes.

Another school hired a third-party evaluator to look at a number of issues, including student achievement, mobility, program creation, fiscal autonomy, and efficiencies—all objectives that were specified in its charter. This school's report also identified successes, challenges, and implications for action in successive years. The report documented a series of fiscal efficiencies that had been achieved and described the benefits of flexibility in staffing. In each of these schools, the breadth of the changes under way at the school level was particularly evident, as well as a diversity in the level of success that they had achieved in various outcome areas.

Several other schools we visited took a less formal approach to evaluating whether they were achieving their charter's objectives. In one of these schools, some of the charter goals were similar to those described above. At others, the charters were written by using broad language descriptive of the school, its environment, philosophy, and programs. One school produced an impressive book containing student illustrations, prose, and poetry. The staff viewed this publication and the well-attended performances held each semester as evidence that their work was succeeding in the spirit of the charter. At another school, our observations indicated that the school was using portfolio assessment and thematic instruction—in accordance with its charter—but did not document this fact in a systematic way for themselves or external parties.

It is important to stress two other factors related to progress toward charter goals. First, many of these charters were written in the early days of the law and few charter school participants had experience writing or evaluating them. Second, many charter schools included goals in their charters that are difficult to measure. For example, many charter schools included goals such as the appreciation of cultural differences, the empowerment of staff and parents, stronger community ties, or improved social skills. Even though these are important goals, it appeared that many school and sponsoring agency staff were not prepared to systematically assess whether these goals (and others) were being achieved.

Student achievement. In its very first provision, the 1992 California Charter Schools Act states that charter schools are ultimately intended to improve student learning and demonstrate these improvements with "measurable pupil outcomes" (Education Code 47601[a] and [f]). Indeed, the regulatory freedom enjoyed by charter schools depends on that promise, at least in theory. However, the appropriate data for drawing conclusions about student achievement in California charter schools are not currently available, for a number of reasons. First, the repeal of the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS) left the state without a statewide testing program. Many

charters, like other schools, had planned to use this assessment as one of their primary assessment tools, as described in their charter applications. The cancellation of the CLAS left those charters without clear evaluation plans. Even though universal agreement on content or process is unlikely, a statewide assessment in which all students in California participate would serve as a reasonable way to compare students in charter schools with peers in public noncharter schools. Recent passage of the Statewide Testing and Reporting program (STAR) and adoption of a common standardized test to be used throughout the state (Harcourt Brace's Stanford Achievement Test [SAT-9]) by the State Board of Education will provide useful data in addressing the question of student learning in charter schools. It will still take several years of administering the same test statewide before analyses comparing relative growth of charters and noncharters will be possible.

Second, we sought to collect data from schools, sponsoring districts, and comparison schools at each of our case study sites. We were able to obtain aggregated data from 8 of the 12 sites but do not have student-level data from any of them. Thus, we are able to use these data as examples to illustrate the complexities associated with the achievement questions, but these comparisons cannot be extrapolated to all charter schools in California.

There are several ways to analyze student achievement data, and we used many of them for data we gathered in this study.[21] Depending on data availability and appropriateness, we compared standardized test scores from charter schools with national norms, with district averages, with scores from similar schools in the same district, and with scores within the same charter school over time. Each strategy had its own advantages and disadvantages. A question for each strategy is the appropriateness of comparing aggregate student performance in charter schools with performance in other student samples. National and district averages may not reflect the student body in a charter school with a specialized mission (e.g., serving juvenile offenders) or unusual demographics. Unless comparison groups are sampled on the basis of individual student-level data, it can be difficult to balance all the criteria for selecting comparison schools within the same district. Moreover, some of the differences between charter and noncharter schools may not be related to charter status. Finally, the populations within schools, charter and noncharter alike, may not be stable enough to make valid comparisons within the same school over time.

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[21] A complete reporting of these analyses can be found in the text of the full report (see footnote 1).

The results of our analyses can be summarized as follows. Some charter schools performed better than noncharter schools when compared with national averages, with all noncharter schools in their sponsoring districts, and with comparable noncharter schools within their districts. Others did not. Likewise, comparisons of charter schools' performance over time (within-school comparisons) yielded mixed results. These outcomes emphasize the need to look at achievement data from a number of perspectives to gain a complete picture of charter school performance. One perspective in and of itself does not tell the entire story.

One factor that complicated our effort to evaluate charter school outcomes also encouraged us: the diversity of student assessment strategies. According to our survey, charter schools use local performance assessments; teacher-assigned grades; and alternative assessments, such as portfolios and demonstrations; and behavioral indicators in addition to standardized test scores in assessing student progress. Good evaluation practice dictates that multiple measures be used to assess student learning and other school outcomes. Even though it is difficult or impossible to aggregate the results of these strategies across larger units (e.g., schools), it is important that educators have access to data from a variety of sources when gauging charter school progress.

The challenge of evaluating charter school performance remains significant and continues to be a subject of debate. Our work highlights several important points. First, a broad view of outcomes suggests that many charters are attaining many of goals they set for themselves. Further, some are clearly working toward their goals and have established processes to evaluate their progress. Others are having difficulty because of goals that are vague and/or difficult to measure. Second, in the area of student achievement, available data do not allow for conclusions to be drawn. However, our case study examples illustrate that conclusions on student-learning questions are based, in part, on what the questions are asked. Questions related to the instrument selected as metrics, appropriate charter school comparisons, and time interval all affect the conclusions one might reach.

Finally, and more broadly, sponsoring agencies are key players in charter school accountability in California. District and county charter sponsors have considerable, often total, authority for determining the content and terms of individual charters. They also establish accountability reporting requirements for charter and noncharter schools. As we have already indicated, sponsoring agencies are caught between the expectation of charter school autonomy, on one hand, and on the other, their legal responsibility to manage public funds responsibly and to educate all children enrolled in public schools. It

is important under the current charter law in California for these schools and their sponsoring agencies to agree on what measures will be used to judge success. They must also work together to establish systems for collecting valid and appropriate data throughout the life of the charter, not just in preparation for charter renewal. In many cases, technical assistance and support are needed at both schools and district levels to facilitate these new roles.

Recommendations and Recent Developments

Recommendations to the legislature. A charge of this study was to make recommendations on whether the California Legislature should expand, modify, or terminate the charter school approach. Several issues emerged during the course of the study that lead us to recommend a number of modifications. The proposed modifications address ambiguities in the charter legislation that concern serving students with special needs, the ethnic diversity of students, and liability. They are highlighted in the bullets that follow.

- **Provide more technical assistance to charter schools and sponsoring agencies on monitoring pupil learning, providing services to special populations, charter school finance and budgeting, and (for start-up schools) covering facilities expenses.** Sponsoring agencies need to be more proactive about ensuring that charter schools establish "performance-based accountability systems." It is not appropriate to wait until the charter is up for renewal to assess student progress. Among many charter school personnel, the lack of expertise in areas such as special education and financial management should be remedied quickly. In many cases, personnel in charter schools and sponsor agencies did not fully understand the requirements or funding mechanisms for special education. We believe technical assistance addressing these issues would be very helpful.

- **Resolve the contradiction between ethnic balance in charter schools and neighborhood preference.** There is a contradiction between the requirement that charter schools enroll a student body with an ethnic distribution of students that matches that of the district as a whole and the requirement that conversion charter schools give preference to children in the attendance area of the preconversion school. It may not be possible for neighborhood conversion schools to meet both requirements in a large, diverse school district with concentrations of students from different ethnic groups, or in schools that draw students from multiple school districts.

- **Clarify legal and fiscal liability issues** by including a definitive assignment of charter school responsibility in the Education Code. We found that concerns about their own liability kept some sponsors from loosening their control of charter schools. Several sponsors reported that their belief that they would

ultimately be held liable for charter schools' financial or educational failure discouraged them from giving charter schools more freedom. Sponsor liability remains a large gray area in charter legislation. (Liability concerns also stalled the state's direct-funding pilot.) The recent CDE recommendation to the State Board of Education that charter schools and their sponsor agencies determine financial dependence or independence may help clarify this issue (California Department of Education, 1997, p. 2 of cover letter). This and CDE's other recommendations on the financial operation of charter schools need additional analysis and debate. The subject remains ambiguous as of the end of 1997.

Recommendations for further research. This paper reports the findings of an interim study of charter schools in California. Because most of these schools have been in operation for less than 5 years, it is too early to draw final conclusions about charter schools at this stage of the experiment. However, it is possible to supplement the findings discussed above with several recommendations for further research on charter schools in California and elsewhere.

First, study charter schools over time. It is important to understand how the educational missions of charter schools evolve from year to year, how charter school communities learn from experience, and how charter schools compare (and how they do not compare) with noncharter schools. Much of the current discussion of charter schools is based on broad generalizations or ideological claims. We need to understand what difference charter schools make for children, parents, and educators.

Second, assess the degree to which sponsoring agencies are holding charter schools responsible for student learning. The degree to which—and the processes by which—charter schools are held accountable for student learning should be examined very carefully. In California, the assumption was that charter schools would embody a performance-based accountability model. It is clear that this is not yet happening. There are several reasons for this: the absence of a state test, low capacity and initiative in charter schools and sponsoring agencies for systematically monitoring and analyzing school indicators, and the relative newness of most charter schools. Many charter schools and sponsoring agencies appear to be deferring the systematic review of school and student outcomes until individual charters are up for renewal.

Recent developments. Charter schools have remained in the news since our research was completed in late 1997. The most prominent development is distinctively Californian: a proposed ballot measure that seeks several changes to the Education Code provisions for charter schools. Sponsored by Californians for Public School Excellence (CPSE), a small consortium of technology professionals and educators, the Charter

Public Schools Initiative is being circulated for signatures to qualify for the November 1998 ballot. Among other things, the initiative proposes to eliminate the current (but ignored) cap on the number of charter schools and the teacher signature provision, limit parent-directed home schooling under the aegis of charter schools, and give sponsoring agencies the option to revoke the charters of schools that fail to improve student achievement (as compared with pupils in similar noncharter schools). The initiative gives charter schools the option to operate either as an entity of its sponsoring district or county or as a "nonprofit public benefit corporation." If charter schools elect the second option, they and not their sponsors will be financially liable for their own operations. Under the initiative, charter schools will be able to receive their funds directly from the state and to use surplus school facilities at no cost. Currently, no direct funding of charter schools is occurring, despite long-standing plans for a state pilot. The sponsor often absorbs facilities costs for conversion charter schools, but there is no requirement that facilities be provided without cost.

The sponsors of the initiative offer it as a vehicle for dramatically increasing the number of charter schools. They worry that the current law does not do enough to safeguard the charter experiment and individual charter schools from legal challenges or benign neglect. If it passes, the initiative will require school boards to approve legally submitted charters unless it can be demonstrated that the new school is not in the "best interests" of children.

Opinions on the initiative are sharply divided within the charter school and broader education communities. Some critics believe that the initiative is well-intentioned but fear that it will lead to more control by sponsoring agencies and that it places too many restrictions on teacher qualifications and on home-study, independent-study, and distance-learning programs. Others believe that the initiative's strengths outweigh its weaknesses and that it should be passed. Voters who are not immersed in charter policy and politics may be unsure how to vote in November if the measure qualifies for the ballot.

In addition to the initiative, the legislature is considering several bills that, if passed, will affect charter schools in California. The legislation pending as of this writing covers charter school funding, teacher credential requirements, agencies eligible to sponsor charter schools, and lifting the cap on the number of charter schools.

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